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The Hi-Tech Guru

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New Delhi : *State-of-the-art technology aids Vedic scholar Velukkudi Krishnan in being the preacher of the moment*

There were witticisms on the upcoming US presidential elections and about Tamilians' addiction to filter coffee — but Toronto's Tamil community was not at a stand-up comedy show; instead, it was part of a religious discourse about the teachings of the Vaishnavite saint Nammazhwar by Vedic scholar and orator Velukkudi Krishnan. For over seven years, hordes of Tamils have been waking up to Krishnan's lectures every morning on Doordarshan's Podhigai channel and Star Vijay. Many in Toronto knew of his ongoing 14-city tour of Canada and the US from relatives back in India. Elsewhere, his followers — largely Tamil speakers — were busy tweeting and posting Facebook updates on his latest lectures and travel schedule.

At the end of his discourse came a reminder that MP3s and CDs of his lectures were available at the venue; those who wanted more content could order flash drives. Nobody found it incongruous that a religious scholar dressed in a dhoti tied in the orthodox way and sporting the traditional tilak on his forehead, was giving them a choice between 8GB and 16GB drives. He has released around 4,000 hours of recorded lectures. His talks are also available at online music stores such as iTunes and emusic.com. "But for these mediums or modern gadgets, it would have been difficult to reach the message to a large number of people," says Krishnan. In an interview in Toronto, Krishnan said that television had provided him with his widest and most varied audience, whereas live discourses still tend to attract a predominantly Tamil Srivaishnavite crowd.

Krishnan's discourses are mostly about Vedic scriptures and the 4,000 Divya Prabhandams (considered to be their Tamil equivalent), ancient epics, and the Visishtadvaita philosophy taught by saint Ramanuja and other Vaishnavite saints and scholars. In today's spiritual scene often characterised by noisy spectacle and emotional overkill, Krishnan stands out as a serene voice, relying on a listener's sense of responsibility to do the right thing.

His comfort with technology has helped him make use of various media platforms and sets him apart from several fellow scholars. Dr V Raghuraman, a Toronto-based psychiatrist and Krishnan's host in Canada, says his 49-year-old guest diligently answers questions, uploads his latest lectures online, and supervises projects in India every night. En route to an event, Krishnan borrowed his host's smartphone asking, "Does this have WiFi?"

The comfort with technology and contemporary issues comes from Krishnan's background. He was born and brought up in Chennai, the son of well-known Vedic scholar Velukkudi Varadachariar. He became a chartered accountant and worked with multinational corporations in Chennai. He had trained in the scriptures with his father from the age of seven, and started giving discourses at 28, when his father passed away. Initially, he tried striking a balance between his work and lectures but realised he was doing justice to neither. He quit his job in 1996 to focus completely on giving discourses.

He gently chides anyone who suggests he "sacrificed" his career, insisting his current vocation is far more fulfilling. "To build a bigger home, have a bigger car, or opt for a software or engineering job is not natural for the atman (soul). To eat food by hand, to drink water from a well, to meditate, all this is quite natural. The moment you realise it, whatever is natural becomes easier," he says.

Krishnan is famous for his mastery of the scriptures, fluent delivery, deadpan humour and his measured voice,

eschewing any histrionics. “He uses anecdotes to explain the common man’s plight,” says Jay Srinivasan, secretary, Madras Arts and Cultural Association, Toronto. While he is willing to incorporate contemporary references to help audiences relate better, he refuses to alter his core message. “I am willing to use any medium, that’s no issue. But if I have to reach someone by changing the message, I would not do that,” says Krishnan. He admits he is orthodox in his personal habits as well, explaining it’s important to practise what he preaches to earn the respect of his audience. Yet he has compromised, he says, by travelling to a dozen countries, including the UK, Singapore and even Bahrain and Oman, to give lectures. He says his father conformed to tradition and never crossed an ocean.

But Krishnan’s openness on some issues may be a factor in his popularity across various segments. He laments that his audiences in India don’t raise any questions at all, unlike those abroad. In Toronto, Dr Raghuraman’s son Harsh Raman, a 29-year-old psychotherapist brought up in Canada, said he had spent time talking to their guest. “He was very open to answering my questions. His English is very good, so there were no disruptions to our conversations,” says Raman, though he felt Krishnan was often “biased” in favour of Vaishnavite traditions. The scholar is unapologetic, “Anyone who is interested in the ancient scriptures — undiluted — is my audience. He may be 60, 80 or 20.”

Krishnan who moved to the temple town of Srirangam, Tamil Nadu, a few years ago, runs Kinchitkaram, a charitable trust engaged in education and restoration of neglected temples. He is personally tutoring a batch of 30 students to become orators. He believes faith is still strong in India, regardless of a follower’s religion.

He cautions against practices such as numerology, astrology, use of crystals or even rituals for prayaschita (penance). “I don’t believe in them, nor do I tell others to. It should only be pure love and devotion towards god.”

Krishnan’s popularity has grown even though, ironically, he shuns the limelight. “I’m totally against any personality cult,” he says. His message to his audience is to pay attention to his message, and not to him.